

Australian Natural History Medallion 2006

Ian Fraser

In 1980, a few years after completing an honours degree in ecology at Adelaide University, Ian Fraser moved to the Australian Capital Territory. He travelled extensively in the region, becoming familiar with the complexities of its natural areas, its flora and fauna and its biodiversity and ecology. This familiarity always had its basis in scientific understanding but was never isolated from his sense of wonder, the appreciation of beauty and the sense of awe and excitement that underpins his mission to share 'the bush' with others. His essential philosophy is that understanding will lead to appreciation, and thus foster a conservation ethos. Through his publications, talks and lectures, radio programs, nature-based tours and service on conservation committees, Ian has made a strong contribution to increasing the knowledge of Australian natural history.

His service has been recognised with the honour of the ACT Landcare Media Award 1995, for his *Nature Table* contribution to Elaine Harris' radio programs, and the ASGAP Australian Plants Award 2001, for services to conservation and education. This presentation was accompanied by a seminar paper, *Maintaining Links between Landscape, Plant and Animal Communities*, which discussed timescales in Australian evolution and obligate plant-animal relationships.

Together with Margaret McJannett, artist Helen Fitzgerald and photographer colleagues, Ian Fraser has written a number of books portraying the local natural history: *Above the Cotter: a drivers' & walkers' guide to the North Brindabellas* (1991); *Wild about Canberra: a field guide to the plants and animals of the ACT* (1993); *Wildflowers of the Bush Capital: a field guide to Canberra Nature Park* (1993); *Over the hills and Tharwa Way: Eastern Namadgi National Park* (1994); *Neighbours in trouble: endangered plants and animals in the ACT* (1996); and *Wildflowers of the*

Snow Country: a field guide to the Australian Alps (1998).

Ian's monthly column in *Gang-Gang*, the newsletter of the Canberra Ornithologists Group, is characteristically called *Avian Whimsy* and it encourages readers to think about many aspects of birds.

There is a long, diverse list of associations that have benefited by Ian's talks and presentations. It includes: Field Naturalists of Canberra; Canberra Ornithologists Group; Australian Native Plants Society; National Parks Association (ACT); Friends of the Australian National Botanic Gardens; ACT 4WD Club; Namadgi National Park; Women's International ACT; Wamboin and Murrumbateman Landcare Groups; Birds Australia; and Cumberland Bird Observers Club.

He presents a series of courses with evocative titles for the Australian National University Centre for Continuing Education: 'Understanding Birds', 'Understanding Plants', 'Understanding Orchids', 'From Gondwana to Australia' and 'But what does it mean?' which demystifies the complexity of floral and faunal names.

Since 1992 Ian has been the guest of a fortnightly local radio natural history show, one of ABC Canberra's longest-running, regular guest spots. He answers listeners' queries, comments enthusiastically on their observations and returns off-line with confirmation if he's unsure of an initial answer. Through shared and appreciated observations and deceptive informality, Ian extends interest in natural history and conservation into the general community. He has also prepared 160 or so 5-minute natural history segments for local radio which are repeated seasonally. In each of these snippets he presents information about a species, a phenomenon, an historical aspect of Australian natural history or seasonal insights. These segments have been made into the four CD set, *Four Seasons of the Bush Capital*, issued in 2004.

Ian was employed by the Australian National Botanic Gardens to create the background material for the widely viewed 2005 exhibition *Phoenix - Fire and Australian Plants*. The exhibition would have increased understanding of Australian flora for those many national and international visitors to the country's national botanic gardens. He has also been contracted by the National Capital Authority to run educational bird walks in summer and write guide sheets for natural history walks.

Because of his breadth of knowledge about species and ecosystem functions in the region and his ability to impart this knowledge to the lay person, the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service commissioned Ian to research and write some 250 threatened species' profiles for the South-East Directorate web-site (120 animal species and 130 plants). He also wrote and designed a series of brochures on *The Impact of Bushfires on the Environment* for the same organisation.

Ian Fraser administered the Canberra Environment Centre for several years, linking its environmental resource centre and educative roles to the wider community. His nature-based tourism operation, Environment Tours, continues to operate in association with the Centre.

Ian was co-founder and first Director of the Conservation Council of the South East Region and Canberra (CCSERAC) in the early 1980s. The Council is the peak conservation organisation in the Region, using its resources to monitor and comment on changes to the environment on behalf of many member groups. CCSERAC promotes protection of the environment from urban encroachment and human impact, using input from Ian and other acknowledged experts.

He also has contributed to the protection of Australia's native flora and fauna through his involvement in two advisory committees to the ACT Government, viz.

- the ACT Flora and Fauna Committee, which makes recommendations on plant and animal species and ecological communities that warrant listing as vulnerable or endangered under the ACT's *Nature Conservation Act 1980*, and
- the ACT Natural Resource Management Committee, which advises the ACT

Government on general conservation and environmental management matters in the ACT.

The ACT Flora and Fauna Committee has responsibilities for assessing the conservation status of the ACT's flora and fauna and the ecological significance of potentially threatening processes. Assessments are made on nature conservation grounds and serve to advise the ACT Government. The Committee develops Action plans describing the threats to habitats or species, conservation issues relating to and protective strategies appropriate for species declared to be in serious decline in the ACT. Ian Fraser has served on the Committee since its inception in 1995.

He has been a member of the ACT Government's advisory committee dealing with nature conservation and natural resource management continuously since 1984. He now chairs the ACT Natural Resource Management Advisory Committee which is responsible for the development and implementation of the ACT Natural Resources Management Plan, as well as broader advice on land and wildlife management matters.

In all of these roles Ian has contributed, by serving on committees of management, to the protection and understanding of Australian native flora and fauna within the ACT and importantly in a regional context.

The January 2003 bushfires that devastated Victorian and NSW alpine areas also altered the region's Brindabella Ranges and Namadgi National Park almost beyond recognition. Ian's reaction to the virtual loss of his 'workplace' was to make a series of personal and then official journeys to assess the impact and to interpret it in the long-term context of the ecology of fire in the Australian landscape. He was invited by Environment ACT to accompany them into the burnt areas, which would be closed to the public for many months, to report on them to the Canberra community via ABC radio and throughout the world via reports posted on the internet.

His reviews and explanations of plant re-growth, germination, exceptional flowering patterns and species' variations stimulated great interest among local amateur naturalists and the community. Ian helped many Canberra residents to come to terms

with biodiversity losses by explaining the cycles of fire-related damage. He ran a specific public course on the effects of fire – its origins in the Australian landscape, the ecology of fire in different habitats, and responses of Australian biota to fire. In this sense the fires were a catalyst for an extension of interest in natural history and conservation within the general community, which Ian nurtured with great skill.

Working with botanist Geoff Butler, Ian has professionally carried out many surveys under New South Wales' Environment Planning and Threatened Species Act. This has involved assessing the likely presence of populations of threatened species and surveying the condition of habitats so that local government authorities can develop appropriate restrictions or controls before development or rural subdivision proceeds. Local councils were able to promote environmentally friendly landscape changes in their jurisdictions. Nearly 70 such surveys have now been conducted in NSW, illustrating the esteem in which Ian's and Geoff's skills and integrity are held by local councils, the NSW NPWS and private developers.

In association with The Environment Centre (and formerly the Conservation Council), Environment Tours have been operating since 1981, 'to introduce people to new areas and to increase appreciation of our region with an emphasis on information and fun'. Ian Fraser and Margaret McJannett co-hosted these tours until 2001

and since then Ian has been running them alone. By mid 2006 he had led 365 tours comprising day trips, overnight trips, 3-4 nights away and 2-3 week major tours. The tours have explored the natural history of the ACT and hinterland, all non-urban regions of New South Wales, and included outstanding areas of Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia, the Northern Territory's 'Red Centre', Queensland and Western Australia. Ian incorporates experiences from prior private visits, meticulous research, knowledge of botany, zoology, geology, Aboriginal heritage, land-use changes and local expertise in presenting these popular trips. He is leader, guide, mentor, teacher as he extends participants' interest in natural history and conservation and nurtures their own skills as naturalists and observers.

The nomination for the Australian Natural History Medallion was made by the Field Naturalists Association of Canberra and letters of support were received from Canberra Ornithologists Group, Australian Native Plants Association (Canberra region), 666 ABC Radio Canberra, Office of the Commissioner for the Environment ACT, Executive Director Arts Heritage and Environment, and the Department of Environment and Conservation NSW.

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One Hundred Years Ago

EXCURSION TO WILSON'S PROMONTORY

The only objectionable animals in the Park are wild dogs and snakes. Rabbits, we were glad to find, had not reached the Promontory. The dogs are not true Dingoes, but have escaped from fishermen, hunting parties, and selectors, and have interbred with the Dingo to such an extent as to have almost effaced the latter.

From *The Victorian Naturalist* XXII p 195, March 8, 1906